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Race Relations and Negro Morale*

by Horace R. Cayton

Fundamental to any discussion of the problem of Negro morale is the examination of the paradoxical role which the Negro plays in American life. The position of the Negro in the social structure of the country varies from area to area, from region to region. In the deep South he occupies a caste-like position which would be difficult to relate to any democratic ideology. In the urban North his status is fixed to the extent that he does not participate in purely social activities and a ceiling is placed upon his ability to compete in economic and political life. In these regions the Negro, however, enjoys some of the rights, privileges, and protection of the law in common with white citizens. The difference between the North and South in relation to the Negro is that in the deep South the present social order depends upon the subordination of the Negro, while in the North this is not true to the same extent. Keeping the Negro in his place is essential to the smooth functioning of the economy, the political system, the education system, and other parts of the Southern social structure. Studies of the South, made at various periods of its history, have shown that Negroes and whites have lived side by side for generations and yet Negroes have always been separate from whites in the structure of the society.¹

It is important that we embark upon this discussion with a clear understanding that race prejudice is not something that can necessarily be eradicated by education or is the misguided thinking of ignorant people.

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¹Elaine Ogden McNeil and Horace R. Cayton, "Research on the Urban Negro," *The American Journal of Sociology*, XLVII, 2 (September 1941), p. 176.

It is an essential part of our culture and upon its maintenance, at least in the South, depend the entire economic, political and social systems.

Dr. Reuter has stated the social process involved as follows:

The selection and placement of population and the economic structure were determined by the character of the natural area. The racial status and division of labor were essential parts of the system. The political system was formed as a tool of the economic interest. The social and moral order developed as a natural outgrowth of the economic and political arrangement. The ideological system arose immediately and inevitably from the system itself.²

In the North, as has been stated before, Negroes are allowed to compete much more freely throughout the social structure but the limits on this competition are such that subordinate him to the majority group. Throughout the United States, and for that matter all Anglo-Saxon countries, the Negro occupies a definitely inferior position which is supported by the moral order. Racism and race prejudice, then, should be thought of in this discussion as fundamental a part of our culture as is the belief in free competition, individual enterprise, freedom of worship, or any other tenets of American society.

The subordination of persons in a society because of race, religion or culture is, of course, nothing new. Many societies such as India, for example, have existed for centuries and have operated rather smoothly with a social system where a person's position was determined at birth. These societies usually have ordained people to a higher or lower position on the basis of a system of absolute values. Thus, in India the caste system operated effectively (when it operated effectively) because the religion which regulated the society was accepted by both the higher and lower status

²Edward B. Reuter. "Competition and the Racial Division of Labor," in Edgar T. Thompson's (editor) Race Relations and the Race Problem (Durham: Drake University Press, 1939), p. 54.

groups. The paradox of America is that though we have a fixed status group -- a caste-like group with sanctions in our culture for their subordination -- this takes place within the confines of a society based upon the principle of political democracy. Developing side by side with the tradition of racialism has been the tradition of democracy. It is true as Wirth has said that America perhaps has a longer and more unbroken tradition of free institutions than any other nation on the earth.³

Originally, the Negro was not included in the democratic tradition, but with his increased education and with the increased social consciousness of white persons he has shared more and more of the fruits of citizenship. However, the Negro's conception of himself and the expectations which he had from the society have always been in advance of what the social structure would permit. The more educated Negroes have been keenly aware of the dual and contradictory American products -- the democratic ideology and racialism. Each increase in education and rise in status on the part of Negroes has brought them more sharply in conflict with these diversion trends in American life and has resulted in the heightening of the racial consciousness of the group as a whole and frustration, cynicism and bitterness on the part of many individuals.

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A prime element in morale -- that element in collective action which enables the participants to persist in their determination to achieve their collective purpose -- is the identification of the individual and group with the collective enterprise. One most important factor which has operated to lower Negro morale has been their isolation from the main currents of American life and thought which has kept them from identifying themselves

³Louis Wirth. "Morale and Minority Groups," The American Journal of Sociology, XLVII, 3(November 1941), p. 432.

as full citizens in this democracy, and having always been denied many of the rights and privileges of citizenship, are not psychologically prepared at the moment to accept moral responsibility for the acts of the collective society over night. A story which illustrates this point concerns itself with an old sharecropper who came to the big house to get his ration of corn meal and fat back. After receiving his supplies and just before leaving he looked at the plantation owner and stated, "By the way, Captain, I hear the Japs done declared war on you white folks."

Then, there is also the story of a small Negro community in the backwoods of Mississippi where none of the inhabitants could read or write. Not knowing much about the war, and being timid about asking white people directly about it, they sent one of their numbers to the small town to listen and see if he could determine, without asking direct questions, what it was all about. After standing around all day and hearing references to the rape and ravishing of the Hawaiian Islands, this individual returned to his community and reported that Uncle Sam and the Japs were fighting about an "old whore" called Pearl Harbor.

This feeling of being alien, of being isolated from the interests of the total society, can be noted in all classes of Negroes. Those who are more aware of the war and of its significances have, in addition, a deep-seated resentment because of their isolation. The statement of a Negro bootblack in a barber shop when he grinned at the writer and said, "We just took Singapore," is an expression of this isolation as well as a sardonic glee that the persons who had denied him the privilege of complete citizenship had been defeated.

Another factor which has operated to lower Negro morale is the lack of conviction that the present struggle will improve his status. Wirth stressed in his article, "Morale and Minority Groups," the importance of a

set of settled convictions as a prerequisite for maintaining morale:

To make great sacrifices willingly for a group must have an unambiguous cause for which to struggle. They must be imbued with the feeling that their cause is right, that something desirable will result or something undesirable will be abolished through their collective effort.⁴

This feeling is certainly not shared by Negroes throughout the country. As a matter of fact the more frequently the slogans of democracy are raised for the general population the lower goes Negro morale. There is the constant comparison between the avowed causes and objectives of the conflict and the Negro's disillusionment with the results of the past war and the discriminatory practices employed in the pursuit of the present conflict. The bitterness of a young Negro being inducted into the army was expressed when he said: "Just say on my tombstone, here lies a black man killed fighting a yellow man for the protection of a white man." Or the statement of a 47th Street jitterbug who said he was going to get his eyes slanted so that the next time a white man shoved him around he could fight back.

Still another fact which should be taken into consideration is the identification of the American Negro with nonwhite people all over the world. In one issue of a Negro weekly there were five articles and one editorial on colored people outside of America. One stated that the African Trade Unions were recognized for the first time in South Africa; two were on the Indian situation; one on Churchill's statement that the Atlantic Charter was not to be interpreted to include colonial people held by the United Nations; and one on Negroes in South America. It is a curious thing to hear India being discussed in poolrooms on South State

⁴Ibid., p. 428.

Street in Chicago. But India, and the possibility of their obtaining their freedom from England by any means, has captured the imagination of the American Negro. The feeling throughout the colored world is that something is going to happen to the status of non-white people; that the change may be for the worse is not the main consideration. Where for years Negroes have felt that their position was unalterable now on a world-wide scale, dark people, they feel, will soon be on the march.⁵

There are specific instances of discrimination and segregation which could be mentioned. The segregation in the armed forces, the segregation of Negro blood in the Red Cross blood banks, the shooting and killing of Negro soldiers in uniform by M.P.'s and civilian police, and especially the discrimination in defense industries. All of these contribute to the disaffection of the Negro toward the war effort. They are, however, simply manifestations of the basic desire, especially of the South, to keep the Negro in a subordinate position. They are important in view of the fact that they constantly reaffirm in the minds of the Negroes the doubts, frustrations and hatred which he feels toward the social system. The important things to constantly consider are the deep-set emotional drives which have arisen out of the Negro's isolation, his lack of complete identification with the purposes and aims of the majority group, and his growing tendency toward psychological identification with other non-white people, and his hope for a change.

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⁵There has been a revival of the Universal Negro Improvement Association -- the old Garvey Movement which focussed the attention of several million Negroes on a program glorifying the black man and the colored races. This movement had as its objective returning to Africa to redeem the Fatherland. Their national convention, the first for several years, ended August 17th in Cleveland. Over 400 delegates attended. This was the largest convention since the peak of the movement. During the convention considerable attention was given to the application of the Atlantic Charter to Africa.

It should be realized that the largest group of white persons in America do not wish to change the position of the American Negro. Just as there is a feeling in the non-white world that things are changing, that this is the time to press for gains, so is there a feeling in the white world that their position of dominance is being challenged. Wirth has stated.

In periods of prosperity and peace we are likely to over-estimate our national unity and to under-rate the power of intollerance movements, so that when we face depression and war we are taken aback by the extent to which internal division, mutual suspicion, and hate can be cultivated among those whose power of security is threatened or who have failed to achieve the full status to which they felt themselves entitled. Such elements in the dominate group are receptive to propaganda which reminds them that, since they belong to the "superior" race, are "old settler," and have been or are threatened with being deprived of their privileges by an "inferior" group of late-comers, they must assert their prerogatives of dominance.⁶

Because of the sanction of traditional American racialism and the fact that the national Administration is supported in its foreign policy by a congress controlled by southern politicians, the pattern of rigid racial segregation of the South has not only been maintained but extended to many fields of social life in the North. In the armed forces and to a large extent in industry the Administration has taken the position that any relenting of the color line would destroy the morale of the majority group. Therefore, rigid rules of segregation have been enforced when they did not obtain in civilian life before the war as a war emergency necessity. The paradox is, then, that the very acts which it is felt will insure morale for one group destroy it for another.⁷

⁶ Louis Wirth, Op.Cit., p. 423.

⁷ Wirth states further on this point: "The feeling of anxiety among the old Americans is understandable. They are not only becoming aware of the distance that separates them from the immigrants and the other minorities but they are also experiencing a sense of insecurity because when they do get

What might be considered the hard boiled realistic point of view has been expressed in a letter to the editor of a periodical:

. . . In the broadest sense, and insofar as the United States of America is within its own ranks concerned, the waging of the war will be the affair of the white man. And I think that neither Mr. Powell nor anybody else need be surprised or offended that this should be so

There is much in the situation that is deplorable. One wishes earnestly that it were not so. I think that very few white Americans are made happy by the knowledge that they -- the majority -- are discriminating against a Negro minority. They will agree up to the hilt with Mr. Powell that the condition is lamentable -- but they will not agree to what he seems to be driving at: that is, free, full, and cheerful social equality for the American Negro.

For the majority, such equality is demonstrably impossible. They know it to be impossible. Justice has nothing to do with it; conscience has nothing to do with it. The separation of the races is a hard and inescapable fact. Only compromise is possible.

Full social acceptance of the Negro is an idea that simply doesn't occur to the white majority. And social acceptance means for more, of course than having the Negro in for dinner or inviting him to join the club. The U. S. Army -- or Navy -- is a society, a social entity, a community of men rubbing shoulders in enormous intimacy. Hence the social pattern of the white community in American life is duplicated here. Whether in a model world or model Army this should or should not be so, obviously, unprofitable for me or for Mr. Powell to argue -- the fact is that in the United States today it is so. It cannot be otherwise, it will not be otherwise, while the majority see the Negro as different.⁸

It should be emphasized that the decision to enforce segregation throughout the war effort results from both the sanctions of our cultural background and the immediate position of power which southern politicians

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acquainted with them they discover that America is no longer the America that was theirs. It is these old Americans, consequently, who find it on the whole more congenial to embrace the doctrines of elite, which lend themselves readily to adaptation by the Nazi doctrines infiltrating from abroad, than the minority people themselves. This is likely to make them impatient with any effort to win over the immigrant and the Negro, among others, and predisposes them to an acceptance of strong medicine. (*Ibid.*, p. 430)

⁸ Letter to the editor from William A. Krauss, *Common Sense*, XI, 6 (June 1942), p. 213.

(who are dependent upon segregation for their political existence and are elected by a constituency which derives profit and status from the semi-caste position of the Negro) have in the national government. However, in times of rapid change the entire social structure becomes more fluid. With a forceful educational campaign stressing our democratic heritage many changes might have been brought about. The situation could have been exploited by those interested in widening the area of the Negro's participation in American life as well as by those attempting to sow discontent. To again quote Wirth:

It may well be true, as General Hershey recently put it when confronted with the charge that the army was practicing Jim-Crowism, that the army did not make our racial attitudes but can only take them as it finds them. But it may also be worth considering that in a time of national crisis, such as the present, mass attitudes are more fluid than ordinarily and that problems which could not ordinarily be touched can now be boldly attacked. When the clamor for national integration is as loud as it is today, and resentment against Hitlerian doctrines is as pronounced as it is, we do perhaps, have an opportunity to accelerate the trend toward fuller participation on an equal footing of all of our people in our national life.⁹

The Administration has, however, completely accepted the rigid pattern of segregation in the armed forces and the army caste has taken Jim-Crowism to absurd lengths. In industry, although a token payment was made in the form of the President's Committee for Fair Employment Practices (later emasculated), it is clear that no stoppage of work in any vital industry would be allowed to force the employment of Negroes if the unions or employers refused to follow the governmental directives.

The problem of building Negro morale on this basis can be approached only from the point of view of how to manipulate the situation, maintaining, on the one hand the subordination of Negroes (which is considered necessary

⁹ Louis Wirth, Op.Cit., p. 431.

for the morale of white soldiers, workers and civilians) while appeasing the rising Negro public opinion with verbal and token gains whenever the tension becomes too great. And this must be carried on in the atmosphere where Mr. A. Phillip Randolph stimulates thousands of Negroes from coast to coast to demand complete and absolute equality, now, and where Horace Wilkinson, Gene Talmadge, and Governor Dixon of Alabama are suggesting the organization of a League to Maintain White Supremacy. This is apparently the impossible task which is in the thinking of many of our national leaders.

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Last year the writer made the following prophesy concerning the problem of building Negro morale:

The problem of maintaining Negro morale will increase in importance as we move closer to the actual war situation. It will doubtless be met by the development of propaganda rather than any fundamental attempt to change the Negro's social and economic position. But the Negro will experience some gains, and, paradoxically, the graver the outside danger to the safety of this country, the more abundant the gains will likely be. But until such time as this country is actually in grave danger most of the attention given to the problem of morale will be that of conjuring up the right type of propaganda to ally his discontent.

The attempt to propagandize the Negro will be fumbling. It will be fumbling because, to my notion, it has not been necessary before for Americans to spend much time and energy meeting the discontent of a large racial minority.¹⁰

This prediction has been pretty well proven. Some concrete gains to the Negro such as the appointment of the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practices, the establishment of a Jim-Crow aviation unit at Tuskegee, and a Jim-Crow Naval Unit at the Great Lakes Training Station can be recorded. However, because of the damaging facts the President's Committee brought to light and its more or less failure to cope with the prob-

¹⁰ Horace R. Cayton, "Negro Morale," Opportunity, XIX, 12(December 1941), p. 375.

lem of industrial discrimination and because of the segregation involved in the two new units in the armed forces, none of these accomplishments has done much to improve Negro morale. At the present time it seems to be the attitude of the Administration that the Negro has used the war situation as a leverage as much as he will be allowed to. The propaganda of the deed for the present, at least, and perhaps until after the forthcoming election, is to give away to the propaganda of the word.

There has been little more success during the past year on the purely propaganda front. With the fear of a reactionary southern-dominated Congress constantly before them, most of the propaganda agencies have failed utterly, not only to effect any change in the morale of the Negro, but to even conceive of an approach to the problem. A few instances will indicate the inability of the Federal agencies to meet this situation. The old Office of Facts and Figures to stimulate Negro morale produced an all-Negro movie short showing a Negro labor battalion singing while they marched and worked. This film did much to antagonize Negroes as it showed them as laborers rather than fighters, carried out the stereotype of singing Negroes and emphasized their Jim-Crow position in the army. It would have been much better for Negro morale not to have made the film. Another Federal propaganda agency is at present producing a book about the American Negro in technicolor for distribution in China in an effort to counteract the Japanese propaganda that democracy necessarily means white supremacy. None of these books, however, will be circulated in the United States for fear of offending Southern congressmen. American troops in England are given handbooks so that they will not offend Englishmen by a violation of the local customs and peculiarities but the army has engaged in no educational campaign to make better race relations between Negro and white troops. Al-

though one finds in Washington a realization of the seriousness of the problem so far there has not developed any realistic approach to it. Given the political control which southerners have over the Congress and the Federal Administration and the mentality of the heads of the Federal agencies in Washington, it is difficult to see just what type of propaganda can be developed that will meet the dual and contradictory prerequisites which preserving the status quo in race relations requires.

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The growth of interracial tensions in this country is alarming and makes the consideration of a more adequate method of propagandizing the Negro both by the deed and by word an imperative. To a large extent the American Negro has become of global importance for he epitomizes the contradictory aspect of American culture and democratic practice just as India seems to be the Achilles heel of England and the United Nations. Indeed the growth of further interracial tensions in the United States as well as the solution of the Negro problem in this country depend to a large extent upon the turn of international events. The present crisis in India, for example, is doing much to raise the expectations of American Negroes. On the other hand, every bid for status by the non-white people of the United Nations, or any military victory of the Japanese, evokes a response of fear and the determination to further subordinate the Negro. In such states as Georgia and Alabama, it takes violent form, and there is invoked a general uneasiness throughout the country.

It is hard to conceive of how this country will deal with the growing Negro claim for a greater participation in the social structure if an adequate program of concessions and propaganda are not worked out. There is no doubt, of course, that Negro uprising could be handled by the militia.

But if violence were resorted to the United States would be in the same embarrassing position as is England in her present dealings with India. The problem of the American Negro is indeed, in many respects, analogous to that of India. A few years back, perhaps even a few months back, it might have been possible to solve the Indian problem on a political level. At present it has become, because of the failure to do this, a military problem. In the case of the American Negro, if the Administration could or would act on a well worked out program at the moment, the problem might be dealt with on a social legislative level. Failure to do this will do much to dissolution our Chinese, Indian, South American and African allies. The problem of the American Negro can be met on the basis of force (if this insistence for participation on the part of the Negro exceeds the willingness of the social structure to accept these demands) but in doing this the United States and the United Nations lose their most powerful weapons, i.e., the moral, intellectual, and spiritual leadership of the people seeking freedom regardless of color.

That this problem must be dealt with is without question, for the real danger of the situation lies not so much in the agitation of some Negro leaders for immediate gains, nor in the very vocal Negro press which points out the inconsistencies of our social system and articulates the demands for more participation. Fundamentally, the Negro in the United States is a disorganized, leaderless group. The N.A.A.C.P. has a handful of Negro intellectuals and professionals -- but no mass following. The church has, for the most part, lost its control over the majority of the urban Negro population. Under these circumstances, and with the feeling and belief that a change in status for the Negro is eminent, black America is ready for a nationalistic movement such as Garvey's when the right demagogic leadership presents itself. Even though convinced that all demands should be held in

abeyance for the duration and willing to preach this to the masses of Negroes, the present Negro leaders would be incapable of exercising any real control over the masses in such a contingency.

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There is a basis for national unity upon which Negro morale could be built. There are as many hopeful signs as there are discouraging evidences of disunity. The liberal groups in this country such as Pearl Buck, Wendel Willkie, Hurbert Agar, Edwin Embree, and the newspaper, P.M., have given the Negro a better press and more attention than he has gotten since the old abolitionist days. There is a growing realization of people of this calibre that something will have to be done for the Negro -- and done quickly -- or the cause of the United States, of Democracy and of the United Nations will suffer irreparable damage.

There is also the trade union movement. Negro trade unionists, and especially those in the C.I.O., represent the most organized and disciplined group of Negroes in the country. With the growing awareness of the labor movement of the importance of the Negro problem many advances have been made. At the recent conference of the United Automobile Workers in Chicago a resolution calling for the abolishment of segregation in the armed forces, the strengthening of the President's Committee by legislative action, the abolishment of the poll tax and the formation of a racially-mixed battalion was voted by 1,600 delegates who represent 600,000 auto-recently mobile workers. More/still, Mr. Phillip Murray has appointed a committee of members of the Executive Committee of the C.I.O. to investigate the problems of the Negro work and report a program of action.

It seems possible that a liberal-labor-Negro alliance might be formed that would make a demand for political power. Such a group would, in self protection, unite against the mutual enemy -- the reactionary,

labor-baiting, anti-Negro South and the Fascist-minded leaders of the North. A leader, a statesman, a party and a political program that could abolish the poll tax and enfranchise hundreds of thousands of Negro and white voters, that could encourage and assist in the formation of a strong, racially-mixed labor movement and could wield the liberal's labor and the Negro together throughout the country would have a constituency and a political power which could be used to force social gains for minority groups, fight fascism at home and abroad and lay the basis for a national unity based upon a people's war and a people's government.